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ABSTRACT

Teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) is a political act, and those who are engaged in teaching English to non- or limited-English speakers are directly or indirectly implementing a language policy that promotes a form of language change in students. This means that TESOL teachers are faced with certain moral dilemmas whose solutions, if any, are complex and painful to deal with. These include the possible contribution teachers are making to the demise of certain languages or linguistic communities, the promotion of a language widely used for purposes of political, economic, and social power, especially in countries in which the teacher is not a native, and the responsibilities of training English teachers who could use the language to promote culturally and politically dangerous ideology. It is the profession's responsibility to realize that TESOL is a political act and to investigate the situation further through general examination and specific case studies focusing on particular language policy situations. (MSE)

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TESOL as a Political Act: A Moral Question

Elliot L. Judd

INTRODUCTION

Teaching English to speakers of other languages (hereafter abbreviated as TESOL) is a political act. Those of us who are engaged in the teaching of English to non- or limited-English speakers are, in addition to teaching, also directly or indirectly implementing a stated or implied language policy as well as actively promoting a form of language change in our students. Because we are engaged in all of these activities simultaneously, we are involved in a political process.

Because we are immersed in such a process, we must become aware that we are faced with certain moral dilemmas. The solutions to be found to these dilemmas, if any, are quite complicated and are often painful to deal with. The intention of this article is to explore both the nature of TESOL as a political activity and some of the moral questions that arise from this situation. Because this discussion will not be able to present more than a brief overview of these dilemmas, the points that will be made here are designed mainly to raise questions and stimulate debate—not to provide definitive answers. As we go through this discussion, it will become increasingly apparent why it is impossible to provide absolute solutions to the questions raised here, and we should be wary of those who claim to. It should also be borne in mind that the nature of this article and the directions offered in it are speculative and may be subject to other interpretations.

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A POLITICAL ACT?

The roots of education in any society must be congruent with the overall political goals of that society. It is political authorities, for example, who decide what subjects are permitted or promoted in schools. This is especially true in the case of second language instruction, both in terms of the decisions about which language or languages are chosen for instruction as well as which language(s) are not permitted to be taught. Further, the degree of emphasis to be placed on each language and the level of proficiency desired for each language taught are often political questions.

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Standards for certification of teachers in general, and decisions about specialized categories for ESOL instructors in particular, are made, or certainly approved, by political authorities either directly in the form of legislative acts or through those whom they appoint to run the educational bureaus. (That is to say, it would be self-defeating to appoint anyone whose political thinking is contrary to the political goals of those in power.) Furthermore, public education is funded through taxation or through other political avenues, and choices made in the disbursement of such funds reflect political philosophies. If money is spent on ESOL teachers, materials, specialists, and tests, other priorities, either educational or otherwise, are not funded to the same degree that would have been possible had the ESOL allocations not been made. If money is spent on scholarships for ESOL students and on teacher-training, it is not being spent on something else. Even decisions about money allocated for research on second language learning and teaching can be traced to political sources. Ultimately, all of these decisions which are made about TESOL must be justified in terms of the political benefits to be derived. In short, educational policies in general, and policies regarding second language instruction in particular, must be congruent with wider political objectives (Jernudd 1982, Spolsky 1982, Tollefson 1982, Judd 1981 and 1978, Tucker 1977, Britton 1976, Richards 1972, Jernudd and DasGupta 1971, Rubin 1971).

A second, but related, point is that ESOL instruction, alone or as part of bilingual education, is part of a country's general language policy. Given that the determination of that language policy is in the political arena, ESOL decisions are political decisions. Decisions about language use and instruction are not made on the basis of linguistic aesthetics or overall structural properties. Languages are chosen for their utility. The status of English and its relationship to other languages in a society is determined deliberately by those in power. This determination may be affected by historical precedents, economic and technological realities, and/or socio-political necessities. It is also necessary for those in power to determine the status and function of English in a given society—either as a native or co-native language, as a language of wider communication, as an additional language, or a foreign language (Judd 1981). Those who hold political power must continually evaluate English language use and decide if changes are to be made. Decisions on whether or not to change the role and status of English are based on the political usefulness of English and the effect of English on other parts of the political arena. Such decisions also affect the form and model of English chosen for instruction in any given country.

The implications of this are perhaps obvious: TESOL and ESOL professionals are not only affected by the political process; we are also part of the political process. We not only receive funds from the existing political institutions; our very existence is invariably linked to those institutions and the political climate in which they function. In short, whether we like it or not, we are political creatures. We may choose on an individual level to remain apart from partisan politics, but we cannot claim that we are above politics or beyond its grasp. As educators who are implementing approved governmental policies, we are part of that system.

THE MORAL DILEMMA

The issue of politics and TESOL is not one of absolute, unquestionable ideology. Everyone who deals with politics eventually faces basic moral questions.

These relate to essential philosophical issues concerning what is perceived as *good* in a given society and what happens when a conflict arises between individual and group responsibilities and needs. Such philosophical debates are age-old and can be applied to a variety of issues. However, for the purpose of this article, the focus will be limited to some general comments related to TESOL and politics.

Establishing language policy in general and ESOL policy in particular involves making decisions. One variable which often affects the choices that are made is the relative status of a particular language (as compared with other languages) in a specific society at a particular point in time. When we discuss the notion of the statuses of language, we, of course, are making relative, comparative statements which elude exact measurement. For example, we can say that Language X has more status than Language Y in a certain domain. Invariably, attitudinal factors influence perceptions of language status. Furthermore, relative status relationships between languages change over time. Thus, certain languages acquire greater status while others can diminish. As a result, choices are made that involve the teaching profession. When we are involved in TESOL, we are hoping to promote the use of English in the target population. Of course, the degree of English language use and the domains in which it functions vary from situation to situation. Yet, by virtue of the fact that we are teachers of a second language, we are agents of language change. If we did not expect our students to learn English and change their English language use, why would we be teaching at all? In some cases, we may be asking our students to abandon their native language(s) entirely. More likely, we are asking them to learn English in order to function in specific domains—in the workplace, in academia, or for cross-cultural communications.

However, these decisions can force TESOL professionals to confront some serious moral dilemmas. Are we, for example, contributing to the demise of certain languages or linguistic communities? Do we have the right to do so? The answer to the first question can depend on the context of ESOL instruction. Generally, in an English-as-a-second-language environment, such as in Canada or the United States, we are not contributing to complete global language loss since the languages which our students speak will still be spoken by others in the students' home country. However, in some situations that are often classified as ESL contexts this may not be true. Day (1981) speculated that ESL teaching in Guam is leading to the "genocide" of Chamorro. A similar situation may be occurring in certain North American contexts with respect to the indigenous Native American languages. Even if we do not cause the complete disappearance of a language from the world scene, we may be hastening the disappearance of a language from its American or Canadian context because of the material, social, and political benefits derived by both the speakers of that language and the wider society from the abandonment of that language in favor of English. Should we be concerned about this state of affairs?

The questions of language change and language demise also occur in non-second-language TESOL environments. Since English is viewed by many as the language of economic, political, and social mobility, is there the possibility that people will abandon their native languages and/or cultures in favor of English and/or English-speaking culture? With the use of localized "Third World Englishes" (for a more complete discussion of these varieties see Kachru 1982a, Pride 1982, and Smith 1981), complete indigenous language and culture abandonment is unlikely (Fishman 1982 and Spencer 1974). In fact, the new English forms are becoming more widespread. Yet, we still must admit at least in some sociolinguistic

domains, such as in the South Pacific, English is replacing other languages (Moag 1982). Is this phenomenon good? Are we as ESOL professionals contributing to this language shift or accelerating its pace?

The answers to these questions are far from simple. They involve basic conflicting concepts of philosophical and moral approaches to the issues. One view is that language shift is a natural sociolinguistic process. Languages come and go in any given community; some rise in terms of status and domains of usage, and others fall. The forces which affect these movements are part of language evolution and we, as second language professionals, have little to say about the process. We should take a descriptive approach and accept the reality.

However, there are those who present a contrasting point of view: although language change is natural, it is not inevitable. We are not, and should not be, passive observers who accept change as part of a larger phenomenon which is beyond our control. We are part of the process and, accordingly, we can affect the process itself. As professionals, we not only can, but must, voice our concerns when what we are teaching produces consequences of which we do not approve. If we are social scientists, we must evaluate and comment on the social processes occurring in our environment. As Day points out:

> All of us should be aware of our responsibilities as social scientists. We can no more escape the consequences of our actions than can those who helped to develop nuclear weapons. As teachers of English to speakers of other languages, we have to develop a social conscience. (1981:78)

In short, we as teachers involved in the political process are responsible for the political and social effects that our instruction causes.

What should be remembered at this point is that these conflicting views cannot be empirically verified through a comparison of quantifiable data. They represent philosophical positions. They depend on personal perspectives and are a product of personal approaches to education as well as of previous experiences, both intellectual and emotional. Some people consistently adhere to one position or the other; others vacillate; and still others avoid the issue entirely.

Beyond the question of the professional's role and responsibilities in second language instruction is the wider issue of the preservation of different languages and linguistic groups in any society. Should the political authorities and policy planners make concerted efforts to maintain linguistic and cultural diversity? If so, what roles will the schools play in this effort? This question revolves around the issues of pluralism and whether or not pluralistic societies are cohesive or divisive. The current situations around the world do not appear to offer any clear-cut answer to the question of how politically and economically stable linguistically and culturally heterogeneous societies are. Certainly many countries that are politically *unstable* and economically *underdeveloped* are also multilingual and multicultural. But there are also stable, *developed* countries that are also multilingual and multicultural. Therefore, there do not seem to be any direct causal links between linguistic and cultural diversity and level of development. There are numerous other factors beyond language and culture which enter into the determination of economic prosperity and political unity. For that matter, depending on how one defines linguistic and cultural homogeneity, it could be argued that few, if any countries are truly homogeneous, including most of the native-English speaking countries.

What we are faced with, therefore, are conflicting opinions which are philosophical in nature and which depend on personal viewpoint. On the one hand, we have what we can call the majority-rules position, which maintains that decisions should be made in terms of the benefits that will be derived by the larger society. For example, in deciding questions of second language instruction, bilingual education, and language maintenance, adherents of this position make their decisions by looking at the ultimate benefits which will accrue to society as a whole. Lewis suggests that this view occurs in

> some societies (that) argue that justice is done to the different groups when the benefit to society as a whole is maximized, when the advantages to the greatest number of citizens outweigh whatever disadvantages may be experienced by minorities (1978: 679).

In terms of second language instruction, we justify our teaching on the basis of the political, economic, and social benefits to be gained by those who receive the instruction. But of equal importance from the collective point of view of the majority-rules position are the advantages to be accrued by the wider society from such instruction. If, in the process, certain languages or cultures diminish or even disappear, the loss is small when compared to the overall benefits for the majority. This same position would be applied in the case of multidialectal education.

An opposing viewpoint may be called an individual-liberty position, based on the writings of John Stuart Mill. Such a position maintains that every group, and every individual, has the right to maintain linguistic and cultural autonomy. Again, as Lewis explains:

> All languages and all individuals speaking whatever languages have an innate claim and an inalienable right to be safeguarded in and for themselves alone. The loss or disregard of one language, diminishing its role or restricting its currency in society, is not made right by the fact that a larger number of people gain a greater advantage. The smallest and most insignificant language groups or individuals, like the largest and most powerful, have a right to exist and prosper irrespective of any calculation of profit and loss (1978: 680).

In other words, society ultimately gains through individual freedom and diversity, and larger groups should not impose their will on smaller groups. It is the right of each individual or group to decide whether or not they want second language instruction, bilingual education, or multidialectal education. It is further implied that those in power should aid diverse groups in implementing their own educational destiny.

When linked to the questions already raised in this article, the two positions just stated aid in explaining how moral questions arise in TESOL. Those advocating the individual-liberty stance would decry the fact that, as ESOL professionals, we run the risk of changing certain groups' linguistic patterns and the proponents of this position would even challenge our right to do so. Since such language decisions are firmly entrenched in overall political issues, those in power have forced ESOL teachers to engage in activities which are morally troublesome. Conversely, the majority-rule position ultimately asks questions about who benefits from ESOL instruction and may even require educators to demonstrate how their classroom

work serves to benefit society as a whole, something which may be difficult to do with any degree of certainty. Further, it assumes that those in power will be able to decide fairly and objectively what is good for society as a whole and then implement such decisions on an equitable basis. From the point of view of recent history, however, this assumption is open to question.

ADDITIONAL DILEMMAS

Until now, this article has focused on issues in TESOL in terms of language change and shift on the group level. Political decisions about second language use are, by nature, group-directed. They cannot be made on a case-by-case individual basis because institutions do not function that way. Yet there are also problems on the individual level since ESOL students and instructors are often placed in situations which are at odds with these group decisions. This obviously sets up an interesting series of moral questions which individual ESOL practitioners must face in their particular teaching situations. These often relate to the general moral question of how and when individuals are obliged to follow society's general principles and when they should deviate from them.

Some examples should help to illustrate this point. First, consider who is allowed to study English. In many parts of the world, access to formal education is restricted to the élite. Those who are connected either by personal associations or favored-group status are those who attend quality schools and/or are permitted to reach the higher levels of the educational system. Owing to the current prestige status of English as an international language, it is quite possible that those in our classes are the most select and privileged of the population. Does our ESOL instruction result in the continued dominance of these selected few in the future, which may perpetuate the social and political status quo (Whitely 1974 and Armstrong 1976)? Can we expect those whom we are training and who will some day assume power to share their social, economic and political benefits with those presently outside these positions of influence (Britton 1976)? Will those with knowledge use it for the society's overall benefit or only to aid a certain segment of the population (Jernudd 1972)? In many parts of the world, English provides access to positions of power. Should we, as ESOL professionals, question the motives of our students, especially in cases where we morally object to the possible uses to which their knowledge might be put? Do we accept without question the determination of who is permitted to study English and who is not?

Finding answers to these questions is difficult and frustrating. The problem becomes even more complex when ESOL instructors or advisors are functioning in a country that is not their own. Does a visiting professional have the right to question the local authorities concerning their motives for providing ESOL instruction and the ways they select students for ESOL programs, both at home and abroad? If we do question, are we not practicing a form of cultural, and perhaps moral, chauvinism? Can we assume that we have the *correct* motives ourselves in judging the morals of others? However, if we fail to question, are we not quilty of perpetuating societal inequities and injustices?

A second, but related, example also shows the moral dilemmas which arise from the political aspects of TESOL. In many areas throughout the world, English is viewed as a vehicle for personal advancement. Those who aspire to economic, social, and political status study English not because they like English or even native

English speakers, but because the language has international prestige: it is the major *langue* of scientific and technological information, and it serves as an internal status marker (Kachru 1982b, Fishman 1982 and Strevens 1980b). Yet, in many parts of the world, the actual number of positions open to those with such skills is limited and the competition for these places is keen, so entry and advancement are often predetermined not by English language ability as much as by political connections. Should we as ESOL professionals inform our students that their dreams are unlikely to be realized because of existing realities? Should we participate in an educational process which nurtures illusion? Again, the issue of morality enters the discussion. At least one colleague has mentioned that he is convinced that one reason for the poor quality of ESOL instruction in several countries is government awareness of students' aspirations to study English combined with fear that if too many nationals acquire English at a high functional level, they will agitate for changes and potentially become a threat to those in power. Thus, it becomes politically prudent to offer ESOL instruction to the masses but instead of using highly trained teachers or modern textbooks, they use outdated teaching methodologies and curricula. Or, as this colleague put it, "Enough English to read the boxes but not enough to take over the factory."

For those of us in teacher-training, moral dilemmas also abound. For example, how do we react to training future ESOL teachers who express a desire to work for political or religious groups whose avowed goals are not only to teach ESOL but also to spread a particular ideology which we find culturally and politically noxious? On the one hand, it is dangerous to use political litmus tests as a criterion for admission into ESOL teacher-training programs. However, do we not have certain moral obligations to the future students of those whom we are currently training (Strevens 1980a), as well as to TESOL as a profession? The answers to these questions are elusive.

CONCLUSION?

It is probably not really possible to offer a conclusion to this article. I have raised certain points about the interrelationship between TESOL and politics and have argued that because of these interconnections, teaching English to speakers of other languages must be viewed as a political act. In addition, I have discussed how, given this view, we are faced with certain moral dilemmas. I have tried to give examples of the kinds of moral-political issues which ESOL professionals face. The list can be expanded without much effort. I cannot, however, offer any definite solutions to the problems I have raised for several reasons. One is that the answers to questions of morality are not absolute. Both sides have strong positions with some validity. In fact, the positions may be irreconcilable. Second, for me to suggest my solutions would in effect be to impose my own moral assumptions, which would be contradictory to the purposes of this article. Finally, TESOL professionals who have already established their own points of view on these issues are probably strongly entrenched in their beliefs, so concluding arguments undoubtedly would not convince them otherwise. What I can propose is that we all begin to realize that TESOL is a political act and investigate this situation more thoroughly, both through generalized works such as this one as well as through specific case studies that focus on particular language policy situations. I further hope that we will begin to recognize and discuss the moral issues that we all face without taking absolutist

positions and failing to hear what those who challenge them have to say. Finally, I hope that this article has provided some controversy so that we can get issues out in the open and begin honest discussions.

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